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THE LIBRARY OF THE
NEW YORK ACADEMY OF MEDICINE *

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The New York Academy of Medicine

SMITH speaking. Is this the Library? Can you help me? I've got to do a talk on ectopic pregnancy next week. I've got most of the main data already, but I need more of the background material. If I come up there tomorrow morning, can you get it out for me? I'd like to know such things as: who first described it, who first discovered the cause, who did the first recorded operation for it in this country, who was the first to suggest laparotomy as the only effective treatment, and who first had the courage to follow out that suggestion. Do you think you can get that? Good! Then I'll need besides that a few statistics: what's the comparative mortality between operated and unoperated cases; how often can an ectopic pregnancy be expected among normal ones; what is the most frequent type.—Oh, and if there is a good all-around recent article about it, one that covers all the main points, I'd like to have that too. Is that too big an order? No? Fine, I'll be there in the morning.”

That is one end of an imaginary conversation whose other end may

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be heard in the Academy Library day after day. The answers to these, or to any other sorts of queries on which a physician under pressure needs help, are to be found there. How many New Yorkers realize that they have on their doorstep one of the most extensive collections of medical literature, for the free use of any and all who have a legitimate need? Medical books, and especially medical journals, are the staff of life to the progressive medical man and woman. That fact was well recognized a century ago when in 1847 the founders of the Academy united to maintain the ethics of the medical profession on a high level and to support a medical library. Their broad foresight permitted the use of their books not merely to their own fellowship, but to all who needed them. They knew then, as we do now, that medical knowledge which is not constantly refreshed soon stagnates, and that the whole medical profession, not just a private segment, requires regular access to new knowledge. Seldom could a physician afford to buy all the books he needed. The solution lay in a pooling of individual funds and libraries to form one good collection from which all could satisfy their needs. Growing slowly at first, the Academy's little group of volumes waxed from a few hundred volumes to a few thousand. Then an occasional large gift stimulated others,—the first such major donation was that of Dr. Samuel Smith Purple in 1875—and when once a sizable collection was established, it attracted further legacies and donations. The Medical Journal Association turned over its accumulation; the Mott Memorial Library and the New York Hospital Library, one of the largest and best stocked in the city, were deposited here. Innumerable physicians gave their large and small stocks to swell the total down through the years. By the turn of the century, 50,000 volumes had been accumulated, and the New York Public Library began to rely upon this institution to meet the needs of the medical public instead of building up its own medical collection, capping its trust in this respect two years ago by making over to the Academy Library all of the medical books, some 22,000 of them, it had hitherto acquired. Thus, to all intents and purposes, this Library serves as the public medical library of New York City. And this it is glad to do, for it has received much from individual New York citizens and institutions, even though it is privately supported and receives no public funds.

What does this long continued gathering of medical books amount to? It's not just a conglomeration of thousands of musty tomes—dusty

though some of them may be, alas. It is two things: first, a living, working collection of the new and vital accretions to medical knowledge, drawn from all over the world where scientific medicine is advancing; and second, it is a vast reservoir of the major and minor additions down the years, among which students, scholars and research workers, can find those out-of-the-way papers which often furnish the missing bricks for the foundation of new knowledge. This last function, that of the comprehensive research collection, is, for certain, one of its most important contributions. There are many other working medical libraries in New York City, sixty or so, at least,—every live medical institution of any size must have one of sorts—but the broadly based reference library possessing seldom called for but occasionally indispensable reports is a necessity for a medical research center such as New York has become. The practitioner and the research worker must have at hand the important records of their profession.

What makes up this record? First, of course, the current journals, all of any importance, and the older ones, most of them from the beginning of their existence, for the periodical literature contains the main meat of all modern sciences. Then come the textbooks and special monographs with the summation of knowledge on a given topic. Primary source materials such as case histories, hospital reports, government documents, and statistical records often furnish the solution of a particular problem. Students' doctoral dissertations may provide the germ of a valuable idea; long files of medical school announcements may show the development of medical education and point the way to improved methods of teaching. The transactions of national, and notably of international, congresses, bring together the ideas of leaders of the profession and its specialties. All types of compilations by medical men and allied scientists are gathered here to form a rich mine of information.

One doubtless expects that these deal mainly with the medical field. Far from it: that of course forms the nucleus of our literature, but there is an ever widening periphery of adjacent fields which must be included in some degree. These are: the basic disciplines, anatomy, physiology, pathology, pharmacology; the substance of the allied professions, dentistry, nursing, pharmacy, veterinary medicine, sociology, anthropology; the general sciences, chemistry, physics, botany, zoology; and lastly, the cultural aspects of medicine, its history, biography, bibliography, its relations to art, music, and literature. When we consider all these

ramifications from the main root of medicine, it is small wonder that they cannot be exhaustively covered even by the 277,000 volumes in the Academy Library. But they are adequately represented here. Practically all of the important up-to-date literature is present, as are most of the vital publications issued in the nineteenth century, and a great deal from the centuries before that, not only those in English but in foreign languages too: German, French, Italian, Spanish, Scandinavian, Dutch, Central European, Slavic, and not a few from Asia and Africa. It is the aim of this Library to provide, as far as its resources permit, all of the worthwhile literature pertinent to medicine, new and old.

Who is privileged to consult it? Every serious minded adult who has reason to. Its facilities are naturally directed primarily to medical workers, and about half its clientele consists of physicians. The other half is drawn first from members of the related professions, dentists, nurses, pharmacists, veterinarians, social workers, college and university faculties and students, hospital staffs; the business world contributes some, advertisers, drug houses and insurance companies; writers in many fields find their grist here, abstractors for scientific journals, newspapermen, novelists, magazine-writers, dramatists, composers of radio and movie scripts, and even poets; and the sister professions of theology and law not seldom make use of these medical sources.

The mass of inquiries coming to the Library covers all imaginable topics. Most of them, of course, concern medicine, but many go far afield. "Who publishes Howell's *Physiology*?" "What are the laws relating to anatomy in the United States?" "What books are there written for people with heart disease?" Examples of less usual questions are: "When were cotton sutures first used in surgery?" "What is the total floor space of all the operating rooms in the United States?" "What famous people had epilepsy?" And then there are the extraordinary queries, such as: "How many women in the United States are bald?" "How many taxi-drivers in New York have gastric ulcers?" "Did Anne Boleyn have six fingers on one hand?" We try to run down the answers to all reasonable inquiries, but, as we said, the Library exists first and foremost for the physicians. Their needs are what it is designed to meet and towards which its major energies are spent.

What can a medical man get in the Academy Library? If he can come to the Library himself, he will get the most satisfactory results. Reference Assistants will do all they can to help him find the informa-

tion he wants: they will show the way through the mazes of the card catalogue; they will explain the intricacies of the various indexes to medicine and the specialties — and there are many! They will give him the benefit of the short cuts they have learned, and above all, they will do their best to unravel that wrong reference that is forever turning up. With their help — or without it if he prefers — he can dig out a single vital point that is holding him up, or he can gather around him just about everything of note that has ever been compiled on his subject — the differential diagnosis of an ectopic pregnancy, perhaps — and he can absorb it in comfort. If some of the books or articles are in a language unfamiliar to him, the Bibliographical Department can make abstracts or full translations, — though it does *not* abstract from English — or it can read out specified passages orally. If he can possibly bring his problem to the Library in person, he will be better able to explain it and the staff to give assistance.

If, however, it is not possible for him to come here, questions can be answered by mail or telephone, as far as the latter serve. Long or complicated queries are better dealt with on paper than by phone, and *very* long ones have to be handled by the Bibliographical Department at a fee, since the demands on the Reference Staff do not permit their dealing with matters requiring long research. Besides the help with foreign literature already mentioned, this Department makes up bibliographies on any requested subject, or checks from the original sources one already made and puts it in proper form for publication. It also edits manuscripts — but does *not* ghost-write! — and gives any reasonable sort of bibliographical assistance. One most useful service is that of keeping watch of the current journals daily for articles on any given topic in which a person may be interested. For a nominal monthly fee, plus an even more nominal sum for each reference found, it will send him each month references to all the articles which come out on his topic in the 2500 periodicals regularly received in the Library. Thus an individual can easily keep abreast of new data on ectopic pregnancy or twins or natural childbirth or whatever he most wants to know about, without having to go over all the publications himself.

There are other ways the Library can be useful if a person can't come to it. If one lives outside New York City, his local library can borrow books for him, though the Library cannot lend to him directly as an individual. The library does not have to be a medical one: any one

will do, public, university, hospital, or whatever it may be, so long as it is a non-profit agency. All the inquirer has to do is have his librarian ask the Academy Library on his behalf for information about its inter-library loan regulations, in order to procure any of our books or journals which are allowed to go out, — and most of them are. Fellows of the Academy, of course, can borrow books directly, whether they are in New York City or elsewhere, and so can individual subscribers making a specified contribution. Anyone interested should ask for the details of this arrangement.

Often, however, one wants books or articles for longer periods than loans will permit. In this case, photostats or microfilm can be made, usually at not too great cost. If illustrations are required, such as a diagram of the valves of the heart, for instance, or a picture of the discoverer of insulin, one can order a photostat or a lantern slide. Special order-forms for these are necessary which will be sent on request.

Perhaps one wants something besides present-day practical advice. If it should be historical data — for instance, the first reasonable explanation of an aneurysm, — one would find in the Rare Book and History Rooms of the Library various histories of vascular diseases, and one could see there the 1728 Latin text of Lancisi's classical account, *De Aneurysmatibus*. If one needs a portrait of that author, there is a beautiful engraving in his book from which a photograph could be made. Or if a signature of Samuel Bard, Washington's personal physician, was wanted, it could be had.

Perhaps one's interest concerns physicians who have made their mark in other fields than medicine: novelists or poets, sculptors or painters, musicians or geologists. Here in the Library will be found the works of Conan Doyle, Charles Lever, Anton Chekhov, and the poems of William Carlos Williams and Merrill Moore. Here, too, are examples of drawings by Robert L. Dickinson, engravings by Alexander Anderson, and reproductions of Tait MacKenzie's sculpture. Further, an extensive card-list of the medical men who have written in the literary field can be consulted. The collection is particularly rich in biographical material of all sorts, not only a great number of collected and individual biographies, but thousands of portraits and all sorts of memorabilia: medals, commemorative postage stamps, autograph letters, diaries, and diplomas.

Besides this sort of material, the Library has a remarkable collection

in an unexpected field, one of the most comprehensive gatherings of books on foods and cookery to be found in this country. The late Dr. Margaret Barclay Wilson presented to the Academy her large accumulation of these culinary classics and kitchen guides from all over the world and in all languages, starting with a beautiful 9th century manuscript on parchment and coming down to Fanny Farmer's standard text.

Speaking of this gift of Dr. Wilson's takes us back to the way this Library has grown. Much of its store has come from the libraries of doctors whose own education and practice have been built on the knowledge in the books which they have generously passed along to this center of literature. And these books mean twice as much for having done good service already. Perhaps someone has choice volumes which he would like to see in a safe place where others can enjoy and use them, or his library shelves need weeding in order to make room for newcomers. Old or recent, many or few, the medical books for disposal will be welcomed in the Academy Library, either to fill gaps in the collection or to be passed on to other libraries which need them, or there may be other things besides books for which a good resting-place is wanted, — pictures of doctors or of medical institutions, diplomas or certificates, commemorative medals, or old medical instruments or apparatus. One service sometimes particularly appreciated is the preservation by the Library of the minutes and private records of medical societies or institutions. Any organization wishing to take advantage of this may deposit its archives here, either as a gift or on loan, and may specify to whom they are to be made available: only to their own officers or members, or to the general public. All such things will help to round out the Academy's collections. If they cannot be sent in, arrangements can in some cases be made by telephone for collecting them.

More details about what the Library has and does are contained in a set of Information Circulars which were published in the March, 1951, issue of the Academy's *Bulletin*, and copies will be sent to anyone who asks for them. This Library was built to be used. The reading rooms are open to everyone Monday through Saturday from nine in the morning to five in the afternoon. The staff is trained to help physicians work out their literary problems. Why not bring these to the Academy Library?